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SERGÉ IULITCH WITTÉ.

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON.

SERGÉ IULITCH WITTÉ was fitted for the conduct of great affairs alike by heredity and training. The former point is worth insisting on, in view of the rather amusing misstatements that pass current. A recent would-be biographer, for instance, declares that the Peace Plenipotentiary is the son of a Dutch store-keeper; and another writer in an earlier sketch said that his family was so obscure that they had only influence enough to get him a position as a wayside station-master. In reality, Witté comes of a long line of noble Courlanders, descendants of the old Teutonic order; while on the mother's side he is descended from the Princes Dolgoruki, in whose veins runs blood as noble as any in Russia. The first Dolgoruki was the founder of Moscow, and his father's crown is still used in the coronation of the Tsars. From him came the long line of Moscow Tsars who preceded the Romanoffs, and whose dynasty closed, in the days of Shakespeare, with John the Terrible and his weakling son, Theodore.

Under the Romanoffs, who were elected by the Zemski Sobor of 1613, the Dolgorukis played a great part, always on the side of freedom, always opposing the encroachments of the Tsardom. Many of the Dolgorukis suffered Siberian exile for their valiant stand against autocracy; and one of them, Prince Jacob, escaped the vengeance of Peter the Great only by his magnificent audacity. Urged by Peter to sign an ukase aggrandizing the Emperor, he firmly refused, and finally tore the paper in two, and strewed the pieces on the floor. Peter was so taken aback that he forgave his daring minister. Another Dolgoruki, at the height of a great military career, resigned his command in the army rather than carry out the tyrannical orders of the Emperor Paul, who insisted

on merciless punishment of the common soldiers. This Prince was Minister Witté's great-grandfather; so that Witté's action in standing out against the war in the East has centuries of heredity behind it. He comes of a great race of sturdy courage, lovers of liberty.

In training, also, Witté had singular advantages. His father was one of the high officials in the Department of Government Estates, which in Russia form a considerable portion of the entire empire. Iuli Witté was stationed in the Caucasus, with special charge of the agricultural side of the government domains. Thus it happened that Sergé Iulitch—that is, Sergius, son of Iuli or Julius—was born in Tiflis, the capital of the Caucasus, on June 29th, 1849, so that he is just over fifty-six years old. His youth was passed in the Caucasus, among wild Orientals, Tcherkess cutthroats, Tartar peddlers, Persian and Armenian merchants, Georgian landowners, a dozen different shades of sal-low skins and guttural voices. He studied at the Tiflis College, and showed great mathematical powers. So marked was his ability in this line that, when he entered the Odessa University in 1866, he set his heart on a mathematical professorship, and worked so hard that he gained the large gold medal on graduating, four years later, in his twenty-first year. He tried his hand at journalism about the same time, joining Asmidoff in the "New Russian Telegraph," which was decidedly anti-Semite in tone.

His family finally persuaded Sergé Iulitch to give up the long-cherished design of a professorship, and to enter practical life. This he decided to do, and he accepted the post of Inspector in the Society of Navigation and Commerce, which owned the South-western Railroad of Russia, connecting Warsaw and Kieff with the port of Odessa. The districts tapped by this railroad included some of the richest agricultural land in Russia, great wheat regions, as well as the zone of the sugar-beet in Poland. The said sugar-beet was, curiously enough, the occasion of Witté's introduction to American politics, in a recent international incident which is not yet closed. Witté began on a salary of \$50 a month, and set himself thoroughly to master the whole business of railroad traffic, and the commercial questions of production and traffic linked thereto. From this point until his entry into government life in 1888, Witté's history is truly American in the best sense; he tackled exactly the same problems, and showed

exactly the same powers, which make our great captains of industry over here. His career as a statesman was profoundly affected and colored by his earlier life as a strenuous and successful business man; and it is this early training which gives him that real grip of affairs which stands in such sharp contrast to the ideology of so many Russian statesmen.

Witté rapidly worked himself up to the position of Assistant Superintendent of Traffic of the Southwestern line, and shortly after was promoted, strictly for merit and for work done, to be General Superintendent of the railroad. Here he met the first serious setback of his career. A frightful railroad accident took place at Teligul; and, under the Russian system, Witté was held responsible, and was called to St. Petersburg to answer for it. He thus made the acquaintance of the northern capital under lugubrious auspices, spending long weeks under arrest in the Hauptwacht, while the case dragged its slow length along, half strangled by red tape, and perhaps only slightly facilitated by baksheesh.

At that time the Southwestern Railroad was under the supreme directorship of Vishnegradski, afterwards Minister of Finances. Vishnegradski came into contact with Witté at Kieff, and presently they struck up a friendship, based on a common devotion to pure mathematics. Witté was also drawn by bonds of friendship to Platon, the famous Metropolitan Archbishop of Kieff, a strict Orthodox formalist and persecutor of the Stundist heresy, yet a man of broad mind, and one specially popular with the Jews of the Western Country. At this epoch also Witté joined the great secret society organized to confront the Terrorists, the *Okhrana*, or Guard, which was pledged to protect the life of the Tsar. This society contained many nobles, and for years countermined the mines of the dynamite revolutionaries. Thus Witté formed relations with Church and State, which foreshadowed his future career.

In the spring of 1877, the Bulgarian Atrocity agitation was at its height, and Russia finally declared war against the Sultan. There was not even the semblance of a Black Sea Fleet in those days, only a few steam-launches, in which Makaroff, Skrydloff and Rojestvensky won their spurs. The Tsar's armies were, therefore, compelled to invade Turkey by land, and they passed through southwestern Russia on their way to the Rumanian frontier.

This crisis gave Witté a great opportunity, which he greatly met. For nearly a year, he toiled early and late, facing the immensely difficult problems of war traffic; providing trains for men and war material, and surmounting the thousand obstacles which imperfect organization and primitive methods, as well as the corruption of the Commissariat Department, threw in his way. He had to face, month after month, very much the same difficulties as Prince Khilkoff so successfully grappled with in the present war, and his triumph over these difficulties was even more complete. Trains full of soldiers followed each other in unbroken series, gathering men from Moscow and Kieff, and forwarding them on the road to Bucharest. Thence, with their gallant Rumanian allies, they marched to the Danube, Plevna, the Balkans, Adrianople. Trains full of wounded had to make their way back to the hospital bases at Warsaw and Moscow; and for these also Witté made provision. Kuropatkin was doing great work, at this very time, as Chief of Staff to Skobelev, and he was among the wounded who passed through Witté's hands, receiving a severe contusion during the great assault on Plevna, on September 11, 1877, after a splendid exhibition of gallantry, as recorded by General Francis Vinton Greene, the American military attaché, in his fine work on the Plevna struggle.

A few years after the war, in the early eighties, the Russian government called for a scheme of uniform tariffs for the Russian railroads, and invited experts to send in plans. Witté set his mathematical genius to work, and figured for days and nights over the matter, with the same patient industry, the same eye for the smallest detail, which had won his medal at the Odessa University. He really knew the subject through and through, and he supported this knowledge by a great constructive imagination, which we shall see active and effective again and again. From amongst many competitors, Witté's scheme for a uniform tariff was selected as the best, adopted by the Russian Ministry of Railways, and translated into many languages. It is a classic of railroad work, and doubtless Witté's experience as a journalist stood him in good stead when he came to set it down. Yet, as one who has translated many of his state papers, I can hardly say that his style is graceful or flexible; it has the sturdy eloquence of fact and sequence, and that is all.

Vishnegradski had become Minister of Finances. He now did

his best to persuade Witté to give up railroading and come to St. Petersburg, offering him a position in the Finance Ministry. Witté, born under the burning sun of the Caucasus and brought up among the vineyards of the south, had something of Lermontoff's hatred of the gray northern capital of twilight and ice; and for a long time he held out. At last, Vishnegradski created for him a new department of railroads, in the Finance Ministry, at the beginning of 1888, and in March Witté finally pitched his tent by the Neva, and entered the official hierarchy, Peter the Great's "Nobility of Work." We hardly recognize the Russian bureaucracy by that title, yet this was exactly the idea in the mind of its creator, which shows how a good thing may be spoiled.

A second railroad accident now changed Witté's destiny. The imperial family just escaped a frightful death at Borki, and the Minister of Railways tried to escape odium by resigning. To every one's astonishment, Witté got his place, and a high decoration, the order of St. Stanislav. Then came the painful and lingering illness of Vishnegradski. For a long time, Alexander III was doubtful as to his successor, and he offered the post to many of his leading men. In curious reminiscence of the ancient story, "I and Themistocles," every one of them agreed to take the post "if Sergé Iulitch Witté is sent as my aid." Alexander III at last saw light, and sent Witté, not as assistant to another, but as acting Minister of Finances himself, and, on Vishnegradski's final withdrawal, Witté got the substantive appointment.

Alexander III was a slow, somewhat narrow, man, yet he had certain clearly marked and sound principles. He saw the danger of German domination on the Continent, where Bismarck's policy was still supreme, and he conceived the idea of raising France once more to the position of a first-class Power, as a counterpoise to Prussia. From this followed the Franco-Russian *entente*, and later alliance, which restored the balance of power so rudely upset at Sedan. This rehabilitation was really an enormous boon to France, and was met with sterling gratitude, which opened the way for immense French investments in the land of the North. In the last few months, we have seen the reaction from Alexander III's policy in the growing self-assertion of Prussia, now that Russia's hands are weakened by the war; yet that policy gave Europe a dozen years of peace and security.

A second article in Alexander III's creed was internal de-

velopment. He embraced the idea of self-development behind a tariff wall, which in this country is bound up with the name of President McKinley, and he presently found in Witté a most able disciple and coadjutor. Witté not only grasped the idea, but carried it to lengths which Alexander III hardly contemplated; and no part of Witté's policy is more hotly debated even to-day. On the one hand, he is praised for having created a commercial Russia; for having shown how the immense latent resources of the Empire might be drawn forth and made effective. The factories which have sprung up all over Russia in the last dozen years are the result of Witté's ideas, and the new industrial class, which has come into prominence during the recent disturbances, is his creation. So true is this that he was stoutly opposed for years by Plehve, who accused him of breaking away from the old life of Russia, and creating a new class, which would most assuredly furnish a hotbed for the growth of revolutionary socialism and the propaganda of the Terrorists.

Plehve was not alone in blaming Witté. There is at this moment a great body of opinion in Russia which declares that Witté has sacrificed the fields to the factories, and has stripped the mujik bare, in order that the factory-hand may have work. Highly colored reports have been published, which show that year by year the stock on the Russian peasants' farms has been steadily diminishing; not only have the peasants been pushed to the verge of starvation, it is alleged, but they have in thousands of cases been compelled to sell their stock and even their farm implements to pay the taxes made necessary by Witté's industrial schemes. Where there were three horses and cows, it is declared, there is only one now; and things are steadily going from bad to worse. To Witté his enemies attribute the general impoverishment of the Russian rural districts, the result of which we have seen in the great peasant uprisings, the plundering of manor-houses, and the assaults on landowners, of recent years. This is too large a question to settle here; in our own country, we have a class of thinkers who say just the same of our tariff policy, attributing to it all kinds of real or imaginary ills.

Witté's reign at the Finance Ministry began on New-Year's day, 1893; and he presently found himself face to face with a grave international problem. We have read a score of times recently that the great Russian Plenipotentiary had no diplo-

matic training and that this would put him at an immense disadvantage; this is technically true, in so far that Witté has never served a term in one of the embassies, but there are other ways of gaining diplomatic knowledge. Witté gained his training in the year 1893, in circumstances by no means so widely different from the present situation. He held up the Russian end of a fierce tariff war with Germany for many months; and he finally came out victorious and dictated a treaty to the Kaiser's government. He carried out the negotiations in his own person, after waging the war, and he was as successful a negotiator as he had been a general. Looking back over that vivid piece of history, it is to be regretted, from Russia's point of view, that the whole Far-Eastern War was not turned over to Witté at the outset. But in that case the war record would have been like the history of Iceland snakes, for Witté was stoutly in favor of compromise and peace from the very beginning.

The story of Witté's tariff war with Germany is as follows: In the fall of 1891, Vishnegradski overhauled the Russian tariff, to see whether concessions might not be made to foreign Powers who were willing to extend the "favored nation" clause to Russia's great article of export—grain. With a view to reciprocity, he decided to lower the Russian import duties on metals and chemicals, the chief articles exported to Russia by Germany. There was a further thought in this move: to open the way for Russian commercial development, by making easy the admission of machinery and industrial supplies destined for the new Russian factories. Vishnegradski accompanied this concession with a polite request that Germany should consider the possibility of lowering the duty on Russian corn imported into the Fatherland. The Agrarians got wind of the matter and instantly raised a storm of objection, bringing strong pressure to bear on the Berlin government. Germany temporized, evaded, and finally introduced a new Differential Tariff, in which the duty on corn was lowered in favor of every country except Russia and Rumania. Shortly after, the lower duties were conceded to Rumania also, so that Russia was left out in the cold.

Vishnegradski's health was already failing at this time; he did nothing effective in the matter, and so things dragged on until Witté came into power. He at once began to make things move. He invented a Differential Tariff of his own, and gave

notice to Germany that, unless concessions were promptly made in favor of Russian corn, he would put his new tariff in force. This he finally did, in the summer of 1893, six months after his confirmation as Minister of Finances. Each side promptly "raised" the other, and so things went on, until Russia's corn exports to Germany had practically ceased, while chemicals and machines from the Fatherland no longer found their way into the realm of the Tsar. Many Moscow manufacturers, who depended on Prussia for their raw materials, had to diminish their output, and finally close down altogether, and a few firms faced ruin and bankruptcy. What Witté did, to help the Russian farmer at this juncture, we shall presently see; but his policy was so effective that Germany finally backed down, and a tariff conference was summoned, to meet in Berlin on October 1, 1893. Sergé Iulitch Witté went there in person, and set about negotiating with the Chancellor and the Finance Minister of Germany. During the summer, the Kaiser had succeeded in having the Army Bill passed through the Reichstag, and this victory once achieved, he no longer urgently needed the support of the Agrarians, so the Junkers were thrown overboard. Witté got his "favored nation" clause and all the German chemicals and machinery needed for his new industrial Russia.

It will be seen, therefore, that he is a past master of the arts of diplomacy and negotiation, though not a diplomat in the narrow sense; and, having once beaten the mighty Kaiser at the game, he came to meet the Mikado's envoys with the confidence of an old hand.

We get a flash of insight into Witté's mind, by noting the means he took to help the Russian peasant, when the tariff war caused a sudden falling off in Russia's corn exports. It was evident that certain things would at once occur: the peasants are always heavily indebted, and very often the standing grain in their fields is pledged to the money-lender, who has supplied the cash for taxes or liquid solace. In fact, the capacity for drifting into debt is one of the grave weaknesses of the emancipated serf, accustomed for centuries to be taken care of and kept under orders. The peasants, therefore, had no cash in hand, and the sudden fall in the price of corn was nothing short of a calamity for them. They could not hold on, and they could not sell for more than a song. The corn-dealers were preparing to

swoop down on them, when, quite unexpectedly, Witté came to the rescue. He instituted a new policy, a vast extension of a system practised to some extent in British India. First, he bought up, at the former market rate, vast quantities of corn for the Russian Government; as the latter has normally to provide for a standing army of a million men on a peace footing, and as the soldiers do not get much meat, the Government is always an immense buyer of corn. Witté decided to buy for two years at once, and thus saved the peasants from the hands of the spoilers. He did more, however; he devised a system of State advances on corn, under which the peasants could either deposit their corn in the Government granaries, and borrow on it as collateral; or, where their own barns were in good order, simply hand over the keys to the officials, and get their loans forthwith. In this way, those who wished to sell were given an opportunity to sell, and those who wished to hold on could do so; the treaty with Germany, which came into force soon after the October conference, presently opened the doors of the market, prices went up, and those who had held on were able to sell at a profit, repay their loans and put a surplus in their pockets.

This was going to lengths in paternalism which would seem to us little short of State Socialism; and it cannot be denied that Witté is an ardent disciple of paternal principles. As the Tsar is the father of his country, so his Finance Minister is to be the country's business manager, putting a finger in every pie and guiding all kinds of commercial and industrial enterprises. This paternalism is shown in Witté's Far-Eastern policy, which occupied the next great period of his career.

We have been told, and truly, that Witté was from the outset a strong opponent of war with Japan. We must perceive, however, that he was just as ardent an advocate of the policy which made war with Japan almost inevitable. Not even Alexeieff himself was a firmer believer in Russian expansion toward the Pacific. Nor is this to be wondered at, when we consider Russian history and see that Russian extension eastward was an inevitable and almost unconscious process for centuries, ever since the Cossacks overtopped the Ural Mountains about the time of Shakespeare's birth. From that day onward, the advance eastward was unbroken, until it embraced Alaska and many of the islands on the Canadian coast.

On this point of Russian expansion, it is worth while to quote Witté's own words:

"China, Japan and Korea, he says, whose population numbers half a billion, and whose share in the world's commerce already exceeds six hundred million rubles, with the help of a great railroad affording all the means for quicker and cheaper communication and exchange of merchandise, will come into much closer relations with Europe, the market of high industrial culture, which makes demands for the raw material of the East. Thanks to the Siberian Railroad, these countries will also increase their demands on European manufacturers; while European knowledge and capital will find a new and extensive field of activity in the discovery and exploitation of the natural resources of Oriental lands. The Asian Orient was, until recent times, almost an unknown world to the peoples of Europe, living its own isolated life for millenniums, aloof from the civilization of the West, and working out its own national culture. The completion of the Siberian Railroad opens to Europe the door to this closely barred land, bringing us face to face with the numerous branches of the Mongolian race. The continued seclusion of the Oriental peoples becomes quite impossible. It is, of course, difficult to foresee all the changes which will be brought about by the coming contact of the yellow and white races, but it is certain that for Russia this contact will bring grave problems."

It is worth while to remind ourselves that the greater part of the Siberian railroad was built during the years when Witté ruled at the Ministry of Finances; consequently, he was called on to pay the bill, and the way in which he did it is one of the greatest financial achievements of recent years. Until he came into power, Russia had suffered from a chronic malady of deficit budgets; every one had grown so used to this that it wore the aspect of natural law. But Witté changed it all, and not only made both ends meet, but cleared a surplus year by year; a surplus which he devoted to paying for the Siberian railroad, which thus became a State property of the highest value. During the same period, Witté was steadily introducing the gold standard into Russia, putting gold in circulation instead of paper, and piling up a gold reserve in the Treasury vaults at St. Petersburg. This is another point of likeness with President McKinley, and it once more illustrates the Americanism of Witté's mind. The prophecy that the contact of the yellow and white races would bring grave problems for Russia, has been fulfilled with a fulness and tragic force that must have disconcerted the prophet.

Indeed there is a note of pathos in Witté's connection with

the whole Eastern imbroglio. His was the intellect which wisely conceived great plans, his the will and knowledge which carried large creative schemes into effect, not only supervising the thousand details, but, by skill and mastery in other regions, supplying the funds for the vast outlay these schemes made necessary. And now that other and lesser men have brought his vast edifice to ruin, in spite of his warnings and protestations, he is once more thrust into the breach, to try to patch up as well as may be the destruction so wantonly and criminally brought about. Who can fail to detect the note of pathos in the following passage, written by Witté about two years ago, on his return from a prolonged visit to Manchuria?

“On the Manchurian Railroad no less than fourteen bridges have been constructed with a span of more than seven hundred feet. Of these bridges, those at the two crossings of the Sungari River have a span of from two to three thousand feet, so that the bridge over the Sungari River near Harbin is one of the longest bridges of Russian construction; it is surpassed only by the bridges over the Volga and the Amur. The average height of the bridges on the Manchurian Railroad is thirty-three feet, while on the adjacent sections of the Siberian Railroad the average height is only twenty-one feet. All the larger bridges have metal frames resting on stone piers, founded on caissons. Amongst the bridges, attention is attracted by the stone arch bridges, which have found considerable application, and which are everlasting, needing no repairs. All the bridges and similar works are well done, and special attention has been paid to giving the bridges a sufficiently wide span, and to carry their foundations to such a depth as to insure them against being carried away by floods. The works I examined were all most intelligently carried out, with all modern technical improvements. In connection with the construction of the railroad, it is necessary to provide for the spiritual and moral needs of the railroad employees; to build churches, schools, libraries and the like.”

It is not now a question of buildings that are everlasting, or of the spiritual needs of Russian employees in Manchuria; and it is pathetic to think that Minister Witté's technical knowledge will be most useful in crying up his country's wares, and persuading the victorious Japanese to allow a good price for the improved property which he is called on to turn over to them.

Even more pathetic is the impression produced by Witté's descriptions of Dalny and Port Arthur, the former being in a special sense his own creation. He speaks of the fine wharves, the stately public buildings, the offices, libraries, churches and

streets of warehouses, and it is evident that, while he was writing thus in the spring of 1903, he was looking forward to generations and centuries of Russian growth and development along the China Sea and out into the Pacific. The sentences quoted show how abstract and matter-of-fact Witté's style is; in the few lines that follow, he comes somewhat nearer a personal note:

"When I went over the line, the special train which carried me went from Manchuria station to Harbin station in fifty hours, and from Harbin station to Dalny station in fifty hours, although at every station, and likewise at several of the more important works, stoppages were made for inspection, while the speed of the train on the circuitous temporary sections was very moderate; and, generally speaking, the train went slower than the condition of the line demanded. Therefore, we are justified in expecting that when the line is open for regular traffic, it will be possible to make the journey from Manchuria station to Dalny station in four days, and consequently the trip from St. Petersburg to Dalny will take about sixteen days, and to Vladivostok about fifteen and a half days."

The trip to Manchuria was undertaken at the close of ten years' hard work as Minister of Finances, and, shortly after his return, Witté pressed his resignation on the Tsar. For some time, the current had been drifting against him and his policy and ideas, and other counsels were prevailing at Tsarskoe Selo and the Winter Palace. It became irksome for Witté to find himself forever thwarted and misrepresented by cabals, and his whole nature rebelled against the policy which Admiral Alexeieff was advocating, in spite of the protests of Japan. The Emperor listened to Alexeieff and turned a deaf ear to Witté, so the great Minister of Finances was fain to turn his office over to one of his pupils, while he himself received the somewhat empty dignity of President of the Committee of Ministers. He knew how to accomplish much in that almost ornamental post, however; and his next great work should in itself secure him lasting fame.

This work is so recent as to be in all our memories. It is the great Act of Religious Liberty which was promulgated by the Tsar on Easter Sunday of the present year. Witté's great religious reform removed abuses which had been galling some of the noblest minds and greatest hearts in Russia for centuries, and attained a result which will do more than anything short of sound representative institutions to restore the body politic of his nation to health. From the beginning, Russia had recog-

nized only the State Orthodox Church, and merely tolerated other Christian or Moslem forms of worship. To seceders from the State Church small mercy was shown, and special pains and penalties were inflicted on those guilty of seducing children of the Church from their allegiance. These were not merely ghostly terrors, but fines, imprisonment, loss of property and endless affliction and vexation; so that few fates were harder than that of a Russian who, born within the National Church, wished to worship God in some other way. All the animus of the Inquisition was there, especially since Pobiedonostseff has dominated the Synod; and he would have found it in his heart to revive not only the spirit but the methods of the Holy Office. These persecutions fell with especial keenness on the Old Believers, who simply perpetuate an older form of the State Religion, reformed just before the days of Peter the Great. The sufferings of these religious conservatives were especially bitter and undeserved.

All this cruelty and bigotry Witté's great and liberal measure has brought to an end, and, though certain disabilities are still laid on the Jews, yet it may be said that Russia now enjoys a large and long-desired measure of religious freedom. Curiously enough, no particular protest from the clergy impeded this reform; in the Church, it is as in the secular government; all power is in the hands of a reactionary and unscrupulous clique, headed by Pobiedonostseff, while the vast body of the Orthodox, including the rural priests, are liberal in their beliefs and views.

This reform suggests the great possibility which now lies before Minister Witté, and which, in its importance, may overshadow all that has gone before. Is his appointment as Peace Plenipotentiary a sign of a genuine repentance? Will his return from the Peace Conference be marked by a new lease of power, or, on the contrary, will jealousies and court intrigues, the malice of the lurking whisperer and the envy of the incompetent prevail against him and doom him once more to impotence and seclusion?

All lovers of Russia ardently hope the former alternative will be realized. Witté has inspired confidence throughout the whole civilized world, as a man of good-will, of honest heart, of immense fidelity and constructive power. He and he alone, if an international vote were taken, would be deemed fit to grapple with the immense problems which lie in the path of his country.

CHARLES JOHNSTON.